

The Business Man and the Typewriter

Writing machines and machine written letters are as familiar to the business men of the United States as letter heads and printed cards. The typewritten letter no longer attracts attention for an instant, unless perhaps some peculiarity in its color or style of type excites curiosity in regard to some new machine. In spite of this familiarity even in our large cities, one finds office after office in which the correspondence and a great volume of the writing is still done in the old way. In the smaller towns the typewriter seems to be the exception, and only a fraction of the men who are writing business letters employ a machine as an aid. The reason for all this neglect is probably to be found in the ignorance of what the typewriter can do and the means by which it can be made useful.

The most obvious method of using a writing machine is for the business man to learn its use and to write his letters with it instead of using the pen. This naturally produces an enormous saving of time and of labor, because the machine can write accurately with speed and occasions little fatigue. The speed which the ordinary man can attain on the typewriter is considerably in advance of that of the pen, but there are objections to this method of using the machine. The art of using a typewriter does not "come by nature;" it must be learned, and most men find that the time required to acquire new habits of composition and break the old ones up is a greater interference with the routine of business than they can afford. Although the machine requires considerable practice to attain a high rate of speed, yet the essential element in learning it and acquiring a facility equal to that of the pen is largely a mental one. Then again the plain clear cut characters do not tolerate certain little uncertainties of spelling which pass without notice in script. The difference between an E and an I is most uncompromising in a typewritten letter. Capitalizing, punctuation and the form of opening and closing a letter are all conspicuous in a machine written letter to a degree that renders mistakes most appalling. The business man, therefore, has usually a great many things to learn in addition to that of manipulating the machine. A man whose grasp of details is great, whose punctuation and spelling are beyond reproach, can frequently make the machine in his own hands a wonderful labor saver. It will usually be found that in saving labor a considerable gain in speed has been attained. The office correspondent occasionally attains a speed of 25 or even 30 words per minute, but 20 is a much more common average for one or two hours' work. When facility has been gained on the machine this speed can be considerably exceeded with perfect ease. The machine itself is capable, according to the different constructions, of going anywhere from 20 or 30 words on the very cheapest in the market to 120 or upward on the standard types of machines.

The business man if he uses his own machine may put it down as entirely possible to attain a speed of 35 words per minute with a legibility he never could hope to attain with the pen, and an ease which is still surprising to those who are perfectly familiar with typewriters.

The second method is the one least known, and would perhaps be for the average business man most convenient, economical and inexpensive. It is to employ some one who is capable of using the machine and dictate directly without using stenographic notes. The average speed of the skillful typewriter, at the present day, is between 40 and 80 words per minute when the matter is dictated to him. When the same operator is writing from notes the speed during an hour's work would probably be from 10 to 25 per cent. less. Most business men, when considering the question of a stenographer, would say that a person whose speed was limited to eighty words per minute would be utterly useless. This is, however, a rank mistake growing out of the idea that ordinary conversation and public speaking are carried on at a rate from 90 to 150 words per minute. Such a speed is really necessary for the verbatim reporter, but when a man is dictating, especially if the matter be carefully considered business letters, his speed will not average anything like that of a common conversation. He stops to think, and makes long pauses in order to modify his phraseology, and although sometimes he may now and then rush a sentence at the rate of 100 words per minute, the fact of the case is that in an hour's writing his speed will not very much, if at all, exceed that of the operator upon the machine. If he would be careful and restrain his rapid utterance, and go along at a uniform rate of speed, he would find that a stenographer of very moderate rapidity would answer every purpose. This being the case it is easy to use the machine in two different ways without a stenographic operator.

The first of these is to dictate directly to the operator, who writes what is said. A little care is necessary in calling out periods, paragraphs, commas, etc. This method has great advantages over using the machine one's self because it enables one to handle papers and look over correspondence, and to use both hands freely while going on with the work of composition. Probably in the majority of cases this method will produce better and more satisfactory results than it would to use the machine directly.

In New York City there is no difficulty in obtaining operators

who can write anywhere from 50 to 80 words per minute, and there are no inconsiderable number who will run up from 90 to 100 words when the matter is dictated to them. Such operators can produce "clean copy," as the printers call it, letters fit to be sent out without re-writing them. The advantage of this style of dictation is very considerable. When the dictation ceases the work is done, except perhaps the addressing of the envelopes. In cases of great haste it then pays to dictate to the stenographer, who uses the machine instead of taking notes, which enables one to obtain the manuscript at once.

The second method by which the typewriter and machine may be utilized without involving the use of stenography is as follows: After the typewriter has become familiar with the general phraseology of the establishment, the actual composition of the letters is not undertaken by the person who conducts the correspondence. He simply makes memoranda upon the letters or pins memoranda on to them, giving in a concise and general way the character of the letter to be written, and the typewriter, taking this memoranda, then writes the letter and submits it for examination and signature. We have in mind a case of this kind in New York City, where a firm, having a very large correspondence, employed a young lady as typewriter who was entirely ignorant of stenography. A large portion of her work for the first year consisted simply in writing letters from dictation. In the beginning every line, from the date to the "yours truly," was made a part of every dictated letter. It gradually dawned upon the head of the firm that all this was not needed, and upon one or two occasions the young lady was asked if she could not write a letter to so and so similar to what had been written at another time to other parties. It was soon found that she had very good memory of the peculiar phrases of the firm, and within a few months, instead of long dictations, the letters were handed over to her with memoranda in regard to what the contents should be. The success of this method was so great that probably one-half of the routine correspondence of the firm is now done by means of the memoranda system. The young lady in question had a remarkable memory for words and phrases, and consequently her work was of the most satisfactory description. Where such a person can be obtained who is moderately expert on the machine, the result in dollars and cents to the firm is perhaps greater than can be obtained by any other method.

The third way of using the machine is in combination with stenography. This is the gilt edged method usually employed in the larger business offices. The work consists of dictating to a stenographer who records it in a note book and at leisure writes it out upon the machine. The difficulties of this method of correspondence are much greater than some persons imagine, and it is the difficulty of acquiring the art of dictation which prevents many men from adopting it. The fascination which speech and speed gives usually carries the people away, and they ramble on giving little heed to the manner of their words. When the letter or matter is laid before them in cold type they are greatly disgusted, and instead of doing what common sense would prompt, that is, redictate it, they take up a pen to rewrite it. The proper method would be to go over the whole of the matter carefully and consider what they should say, making notes here and there of alterations, and then dictate it a second time.

One of the advantages which dictation, either to the typewriter or to the stenographer, has over the direct work is in the fact that after a half day's work the double exhaustion produced by physical labor and brain work combined is avoided. The actual labor of writing with a pen is a serious matter, especially if great speed is obtained. Hence physical fatigue is mingled with brain weariness, and the fatigue is worse than any other muscular tax, because it is produced by the exhaustion or overwork of a single set of muscles. Ten or fifteen thousand words can be dictated leaving a man fresh and ready for anything else, and in better condition generally than he would be after writing two thousand words with the pen. Not only is the speed increased by depending on the machine, but the composition is improved, and there is this advantage in the typewritten letter which is not likely to be considered. It is first, the fact that in looking it over for correction the eye takes in more and can more readily judge of the effect of each phrase, and, secondly, because the reader gets the idea more quickly and more clearly; he has, in receiving such a letter, somewhat the advantage of reading printed matter. There is no uncertainty; one word is not easily mistaken for another or left in doubt while his mind gets a wrong impression, which is not always removed when the word is deciphered. For a clear conveying of ideas, therefore, the typewriting machine would be worth all it costs, and the cost of operation by a third person, even though there were nothing gained in any other respect except that of clearness to the recipient of the communication, and it is hardly possible to overestimate this advantage. The business man can prove it by reference at any time to his files of letters, and taking out at random one written by the pen and one on the machine. Consider them in all their parts, and the way the idea strikes one, the certainty and compactness, and it will be found that the pen work bears no comparison to that of the machine.